



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

THE BOOK OF THE MONTH

DIAGNOSING AMERICA¹

BY LAWRENCE GILMAN

WE have before us a volume of 500-odd pages entitled *Civilization in the United States: An Inquiry by Thirty Americans*. Its purpose is clearly stated on the jacket of the book: This is "not a collection of overlapping essays, but a unified work growing out of the meetings of a group of American writers, who planned this re-valuation of our contemporary culture in the spirit of the eighteenth century French Encyclopedists. The book is neither propaganda nor apology, but the unbiased attempt of a group of more or less kindred minds to sum up the larger aspects of American life and culture, and point out the defects as well as the virtues of American civilization."

The first thing that strikes the reader is that there are some remarkable omissions in the book. In what is avowedly an attempt "to sum up the larger aspects of American life and culture", there is no study of Architecture; none of Religion; none of that strange and significant expression of the spiritual mind of America which might be roughly indicated as the "New Thought" movement—something quite apart from what the Church knows as Religion, yet profoundly and engrossingly revelatory of the national temper. Nor is there any examination of the American Periodical—the kind of inquiry into an immensely significant phase of our civilization which Professor Henry Seidel Canby contributed to *THE NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW* not long ago.

Who are the "thirty Americans" whose labors of inquiry and discussion are here assembled? They are strangely assorted, strangely unequal in ability. We give, for the sake of completeness, their names and subjects: *The City*, Lewis Mumford;

¹*Civilization in the United States: An Inquiry by Thirty Americans*. Edited by Harold E. Stearns. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co.

Politics, H. L. Mencken; *Journalism*, John Macy; *The Law*, Zechariah Chafee, Jr.; *Education*, Robert Morss Lovett; *Scholarship and Criticism*, J. E. Spingarn; *School and College Life*, Clarence Britten; *The Intellectual Life*, Harold E. Stearns; *Science*, Robert H. Lowie; *Philosophy*, Harold Chapman Brown; *The Literary Life*, VanWyck Brooks; *Music*, Deems Taylor; *Poetry*, Conrad Aiken; *Art*, Walker Pach; *The Theatre*, George Jean Nathan; *Economic Opinion*, Walter H. Hamilton; *Radicalism*, George Soule; *The Small Town*, Louis Raymond Reid; *History*, H. W. Van Loon; *Sex*, Elsie Clews Parsons; *The Family*, Katharine S. Anthony; *The Alien*, Frederick C. Howe; *Racial Minorities*, Geroid Tanquary Robinson; *Advertising*, J. Thorne Smith; *Business*, Garet Garrett; *Engineering*, O. S. Beyer, Jr.; *Nerves*, Alfred B. Kuttner; *Medicine*, Anonymous; *Sport and Play*, Ring W. Lardner; *Humor*, Frank M. Colby. In addition, there are three essays offering a view of American Civilization "from the Foreign Point of View", written by an Englishman (Henry L. Stuart), an Irishman (Ernest Boyd), and an Italian (Raffaello Piccoli). There are bibliographical notes, a "Who's Who of Contributors", and an index.

It may be said at once that those who come to this book with the expectation of finding anything that might be described by that glib adjective, "constructive", will be disappointed. These investigators did not set out to be "constructive": their aim was to diagnose, to dissect; not to prescribe. They were "constructive" only to the same degree that a surgeon is when he attends to a bodily lesion. He operates, and goes his way. It is up to the patient to get well, assisted by Nature, and by another kind of medical man, with prescriptions of a tonic and advice as to regimen; but the surgeon is through. To state the matter in another way, it is the sole duty of an enlightened Building Commissioner to see that an unsanitary and unsafe tenement-house is pulled down. You do not ask him to put up a new building in its place—that is the duty of private capital (at least in our present civilization); of the real estate interests. Mr. Stearns puts the matter admirably when he says that he and his collaborators wished to speak the truth about American civilization as they saw it, in order to do their share in making

a real civilization possible—"I think with all of us [he says] there was a common assumption that a field cannot be ploughed until it has first been cleared of rocks, and that constructive criticism can hardly exist until there is something on which to construct". That seems unanswerable; and so it is beside the point to quarrel with these Thirty Americans for not doing something which was no part of their duty, as they saw it. They have been hotly taken to task because they "set forth . . . nothing of articulate excellence"; because they "condemn". Well, the surgeon "condemns" an infected finger or a diseased appendix, without being asked why the devil he doesn't admire the color of the patient's eyes or speak favorably of his chest development. That is not, at the moment, his business. Nor is it pertinent to make light of the extreme earnestness, of the "pessimism", of these inquirers, or to sneer at them or abuse them. The only legitimate concern of the critic or the reader is to form an opinion as to the truth of the charges against our civilization that are brought in this book.

We have not space to examine these charges in detail; but it is possible to summarize them, and with fairness, because Mr. Stearns himself does so in his recapitulation of "the three major contentions" which, in his own term, are "basic" in all the essays. These major contentions are as follows (we shall venture to comment upon each of them in turn):

First: That in almost every branch of American life there is a sharp dichotomy between preaching and practice; we let not our right hand know what our left hand doeth. Curiously enough, no one regards this, and in fact no one consciously feels this as hypocrisy—there are certain abstractions and dogmas which are sacred to us, and if we fall short of these external standards in our private life, that is no reason for submitting them to a fresh examination; rather are we to worship them the more vociferously to show our sense of sin. Regardless, then, of the theoretical excellence or stupidity of these standards, in actual practice the moral code resolves itself into the one cardinal heresy of being found out, with the chief sanction enforcing it, the fear of what people will say.

That seems to us so true as to be platitudinous. No American who is penetrating, candid, and humorous would, we fancy, dream of denying the essential justice of this accusation. It is perfectly true that there is much disheartening hypocrisy in our

attitude toward legal and moral prohibitions. The evidences of it are inescapable. It would be merely otiose to cite instances. The word "bunk" was probably invented in America to meet the need of describing a thing which seems to be peculiarly our own. If the contention of the Thirty Inquirers is not sufficiently illustrated by that most obvious of examples, our attitude toward the Eighteenth Amendment, it would be hard to prove the contrary. What we preach is that this particular law is a grand and holy thing for the workingman, but one which we who do not happen to be workingmen (in the special sense of the term) need not regard. And so we cheerfully flout the law which our representatives put on the statute-books for us, and install cafés in our clubs and supply wine at our semi-public banquets and buy bad and expensive liquor at restaurants (when we can afford it) and turn our trousers into baby bars. The Best People do these things—judges, lawyers, editors, captains of industry, politicians (when they think they won't be found out); and, as Mr. Stearns accurately observes, "no one consciously feels this as hypocrisy". But it would be fatuous to labor the point. The truth of the charge is apparent to anyone who is not either stupid or dishonest. So let us move on to the second count in the indictment:

Whatever else American civilization is, it is not Anglo-Saxon, and we shall never achieve any genuine nationalistic self-consciousness as long as we allow certain financial and social minorities to persuade us that we are still an English Colony. Until we begin seriously to appraise and warmly to cherish the heterogeneous elements which make up our life, and to see the common element running through all of them, we shall make not even a step towards true unity; we shall remain, in Roosevelt's class-conscious and bitter but illuminating phrase, a polyglot boarding-house.

But if American civilization is actually something other than "Anglo-Saxon", what difference does it make whether or not "certain financial and social minorities" try to persuade us that we are still an English Colony? We are not, and we know we are not. If the Financial and Social Minorities wish to solace themselves by thinking so, of what consequence is it? The implication is that we allow those parties (as Mark Twain might call them) to persuade us. But whom do the Thirty

Enquirers mean when they say "us"? Is the best of our fictionists, Mr. Sherwood Anderson, persuaded that we are an English Colony? Ask him—or read his books. Did the best of our music makers think so? Listen to the *Keltic* Sonata of MacDowell, to his typical and magnificent *Indian* Suite. Listen to Carpenter's Jazz ballet, to John Powell's *Negro Rhapsody*, to Griffeth's *Kubla Khan*. Ask Carl Sandburg or Edgar Lee Masters or Robert Frost. Is Congress persuaded? We hold no brief for Congress—indeed, we heartily agree with most of what Mr. H. L. Mencken says of it in his contribution to *Civilization in America*; but we perceive no evidence that Congress is persuaded that we are an English Colony. The Thirty Enquirers seem to deplore our lack of "nationalistic self-consciousness". Again, we perceive no evidence of this lack. What does it matter, anyway? Certainly it matters little to what the Thirty sometimes describe as "the creative life". Richard Wagner neither needed nor responded to any spirit of "nationalistic self-consciousness" when he composed the greatest music in the world, the score of *Tristan und Isolde*, which is far more Italian in style than it is German. How French is the most beautiful and distinguished of French operas, *Pelléas et Mélisande*? The answer must be that it lacks many of the qualities that a "nationalistic self-consciousness" should have taught Debussy to give it, and possesses other characteristics that are not French at all. The best musical setting of *Falstaff* is by an Italian. The most "American" of all symphonies was written by a Bohemian. We have gone to music for these instances because it is in music that a nationalistic self-consciousness, in the creative field, has freest play. So, as we said, what does it matter, even if what the Thirty seem to believe is true?

The third and last of the book's major contentions is thus set forth:

The most moving and pathetic fact in the social life of America to-day is emotional and æsthetic starvation. . . . There must be an entirely new deal of the cards in one sense; we must change our hearts. For only so, unless through the humbling of calamity or scourge, can true art and true religion and true personality, with their native warmth and caprice and gaiety, grow up in America.

“Emotional Starvation”? Let us consider this first, and briefly. Is the American in his social life emotionally starved? We do not believe it. On the contrary, he is emotionally overstimulated. For the typical American (if there is any such bird—and the Thirty apparently think they have isolated him) is nothing if not emotional; although we hasten to say that we are not perfectly sure just what value to give to the word “emotional” in the phrase quoted above; for its significance there is not clear and is not defined. “Æsthetic starvation” is a different matter. If the phrase means that our American civilization suffers from lack of æsthetic nourishment—that such appetite as we possess has not enough to feed on; not enough fine literature to read, fine music to hear, fine plays to see—we do not think it conveys truth. In what other contemporary civilization do rich individuals spend such appalling sums of money for the support of symphony orchestras, for example? If the civilized American is yearning to steep himself in æsthetic experience, he has only himself to blame if he does not do so. But perhaps the meaning of the Thirty is that he doesn’t *want* to; and so their phrase should have read: “Æsthetic incapacity”, or “æsthetic insensibility”; and then it would have been true and apt.

What Mr. Deems Taylor says in his admirable essay on *Music* is true, in the main, of the attitude of Americans toward all æsthetic experience: “Instruction, release, amusement—that, in general, is all we want of art. . . . The typical American goes to an art-work either frankly to have his senses tickled or for the sake of a definite thing that it says or a series of extraneous images or thoughts that it evokes—never for the *Ding an sich*. Of pure æsthetic emotion he exhibits very little. To him, beauty is emphatically not its own excuse for being. He does not want it for its own sake, and distrusts and fears it when it appears before him unclothed in moral lessons or associated ideas.”

That is indisputably true, and it is, in all conscience, a sufficiently grave indictment. How can a people that feels thus about the finest things of the mind dare to believe that its civilization is a respectable thing, let alone an admirable thing? For what is “civilization”? It is, said Mr. Webster, “relative advancement in social culture”. By that definition we have no reason to be

proud of ourselves so far as our relation to spiritual rareness is concerned. And in other respects there are harsh and mortifying things to be said of us. We are, taking us by and large, bigoted, sentimental, superficial; we are unbelievably submissive, being the Easy Marks of the ages ("docile" was Lord Northcliffe's politely indicative word for it). We have schoolboy brains and schoolgirl emotions. We are governed, on the whole, by legislatures that are, to say the least, depressingly unintelligent,—that carry on the discussion of measures of the utmost importance "in the manner of the Chautauqua and the rural stump". Our thinking is conventional and standardized. At its worst, it is muddled and hysterical; seldom lucid, uninhibited, and poised. We are poor sports, for we are cruel and oppressive toward unpopular minorities. Unable to endure dissenters, we suppress them whenever we can.

These are some—the most damaging—of the charges that are brought against us by the Thirty. It is dismaying to consider them calmly and to be forced to admit that they are, in the main, warranted. That admission is not agreeable. Many will refuse to make it. But we do not believe that any sensitive, dispassionate, and candid student of contemporary American life can fail to realize that there is an overwhelming measure of truth in these allegations. Despite our kindness, our genuine thirst after righteousness, our receptiveness, our gayety and humor, we have much to do to be saved. Let those who know and cherish America be the first to chastize her, not the last; for their chastizing is founded "not on hate of what they cannot understand, but on love of what they wish all to share".

LAWRENCE GILMAN.